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ABSTRACT

When compared with students at four-year campuses, community college students show lower levels of participation in campus organizations and attendance at campus-sponsored events. According to a study, 80% of the student body almost never attended a meeting of a club, organization, or student government group. Yet, research has shown that student involvement correlates with self-reported gain in personal and social development. This paper examines the value of student involvement in general, and traditional extracurricular activities in particular, at two-year campuses. It begins with a discussion on theories of student involvement and how they have been applied to four- and two-year institutions. The paper also discusses the level of participation in student activities and considers the barriers that hinder such participation, such as campus environment, campus resources, and student characteristics. Because traditional venues for student involvement also exist at community colleges, the author highlights the impact of residential living, athletics, clubs, honors programs, and student government on students' college experiences. The paper concludes with recommendations for improving student engagement, which include: (1) customizing extracurricular activities to fit the schedules and particular needs of older and part-time students; (2) reexamining the focus of student activities; and (3) implementing, supporting, and assessing student activities. (Contains 30 references.) (EMH)

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Student involvement in the community college:
A look at the diversity and value of student activities and programs

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ED 263

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Introduction

Prominently displayed on any community college web-site or brochure is a listing of the various student activities offered at the campus. While the diversity and number of activities and programs may resemble that of four-year institutions, student participation and involvement at community colleges does not. For example, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, while close to 50 percent of students at public four-year institutions participate in school clubs, only 18 percent of community college students engage in such activity (Coley, 2000). This stark difference in participation rates raises several questions: Does the need for student involvement vary at the two institutional types? What contributes to the difference in participation? And what forms of involvement are appropriate and meaningful for community college students?

This paper examines the value of student involvement in general and traditional extracurricular activities in particular at two-year campuses. I begin with a discussion on theories of student involvement and how they have been applied to study four- and two-year institutions. The section following examines the level of participation in student activities and also considers the barriers that hinder such participation. Because traditional venues for student involvement exist at community colleges, I will then highlight the impact of residential living, athletics, clubs, honors programs, and student government on students' college experiences. In conclusion, recommendations for improving engagement of the community college student population will be suggested and explored.

The need for involvement

The work of several researchers has asserted and shown the importance of student involvement in the college setting. Astin (1984) defines involvement as the "quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience" (p.298). While Astin acknowledges the importance of motivation, he focuses more on the behaviors and active participation of students in his conceptualization of involvement. He asserts that student development and learning are dependent on how involved or invested a student is in his/her environment. Through athletics, clubs, or research projects with faculty members, colleges can provide various opportunities that foster student involvement.

Further, Tinto (1993) explains that involvement is necessary for integration into the college environment, and integration increases the likelihood of persistence. Specifically, Tinto describes academic and social forms of integration and the formal and informal dimensions of each. Academic integration refers to the interactions and activities that students experience as part of their formal education. Social integration, on the other hand, "centers about the daily life and personal needs of the various members of the institution" (p.106). These forms of integration are intricately interwoven and can exhibit mutual influence. For example, high levels of social integration, through the development of peer networks, can positively affect students' academic achievement.

Pace (1984) supports the need for involvement and operationalizes the term by accounting for the quality of effort that students exhibit. He feels that participation is not sufficient for engagement, but instead, the investment of time (as measured by the frequency of activity) and effort must be considered.

These perspectives on student involvement have repeatedly been employed when exploring the experiences of students at four-year campuses. Through a myriad of studies, involvement has been shown to positively affect, among other outcomes, grade point average (GPA), satisfaction with the campus, and adjustment (Astin, 1993). The literature on involvement in community colleges is significantly less than that seen for four-year institutions. Nonetheless, the need for and value of student engagement has also been applied to two-year campuses. Monroe (1972) writes, "Community colleges almost universally recognize the need for student activities and participation" (p.174).

To measure the effects of community college student involvement, Friedlander, Pace and Lehman (1992) developed the Community College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CCSEQ). This survey instrument includes a variety of items, with a large portion of the survey focusing on college activities and the quantity and quality of student effort expended on these activities. Researchers at the University of Texas at Austin have also developed the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), a companion to the National Survey of Student Engagement for four-year institutions. This instrument asks students how they spend their time and about the types of interactions they have with faculty and peers (CCSSE web-site). Both of these resources are relatively new and have the potential to serve as rich data sources for examining student involvement and specifically at two-year colleges.

Using the CCSEQ, Glover (1998) found that increased community college student involvement is correlated with self-reported gain in personal and social development. In addition, progress in general education, high GPA, and retention are also positively

associated with participation in student activities at community college campuses (Glover, 1998; Mutter, 1992). In his book Perspectives on the Community College, Lombardi (1969) alludes to the fact that engagement of the student body also provides for more active and culturally aware students. As one of the aims of two-year colleges is to foster community service, student participation in activities on campus is also seen as a step toward long-term service. A study conducted at a large midwestern community college supported this argument (Eklund-Leen & Young, 1996). The authors found that student involvement in clubs and organizations positively influences students' attitudes toward community involvement.

State of involvement and barriers to involvement

While the need for student involvement is recognized and supported by researchers, educators, and administrators, the level of student participation does not reflect such aims. When compared to students at four-year campuses, community college students show lower levels of participation in campus organizations and attendance at campus-sponsored events. In a study of students at a large, suburban and ethnically-diverse two-year college, 57 percent of students responded that they almost never participated in activities with other students since enrolling in college. Further, close to 80 percent of the student body almost never attended a meeting of a club, organization, or student government group (Maxwell, 2000). In a separate single-institution study, Hagedorn (2000) discovered that less than one-fifth of the students surveyed joined in formal activities with other students more than one time per week. Men displayed a higher frequency of participation as compared to their female peers. Beyond engagement in activities and programs, lower levels of academic

involvement have also been observed. For example, community college students speak with faculty outside of class less frequently than students at four-year colleges and universities (Coley, 2000).

The discrepancy in student participation at two- and four-year institutions is largely attributed to the very different student bodies and environments of the two types of institutions. The majority of community colleges are commuter campuses where many students balance academics with commitments to family and off-campus employment. Because of this, a large proportion of students and faculty members are part-time and bustle in and out of campus on any given day. In marked contrast, four-year colleges mainly matriculate full-time students who identify themselves first and foremost as students. While activities such as fraternities, clubs, athletics, and student government exist at both types of institutions, the non-residential nature of community campuses complicates or discourages student participation and engagement (Cohen & Brawer, 1996).

Therefore, the barriers that hinder involvement arise largely from the nature of the students who attend these campuses. Due to the balancing of multiple commitments and responsibilities, students spend limited time on campus once class is over. This, coupled with the high turnover rate of the student body, greatly reduces availability for and frequency of participation (Monroe, 1972). Further, not only is a large percentage of the student body comprised of part-time students, but also over half of them are over the age of 24 (Cohen & Brawer, 1996). Hughes (1994) writes that the older students utilize campus services at a low rate as their needs for activity, interaction, and development may differ considerably from those of 18 to 24 year olds. The Dean of Student Services and Learning Resources at College of the Desert, states frankly, "Most community college students have

little time for or interest in getting involved with campus life" (Spann & Calderwood, 1998). Maxwell (2000) concurs and explains that traditional student activities may "lack relevance for the majority of [community college] students" (p.209).

Moreover, the lack of participation in student activities results in decreased financial backing of programs, which in turn reduces the quality of services. Due to the tight budgeting at many two-year colleges, administrators are constantly reviewing programs to see where resources can be saved. In recent years, budget restrictions have greatly limited student affairs staff and services (Williams, 2000; Nejman, 1999). As student services, such as extracurricular activities, show low levels of utilization and are not seen as essential to the institution's survival, they are often the first to be cut (Williams, 2000). While such budgeting may be a reaction to student participation, lack of financial support for these programs certainly does not encourage increased involvement. Therefore, barriers to involvement arise from the nature of the student body and budget restrictions on student affairs services.

Activities such as athletic clubs, music activities, and moral organizations, have existed at community college campuses since the 1930's (Cohen, 1996). The benefits that these programs impart to students and the institutions support increased involvement. The relative value and applicability of different types of activities at these campuses may be the more pertinent point of discussion. In the following sections, I will first examine how traditional venues for involvement, as seen at many four-year campuses, function at the two-year campus. Then, I will consider more curricular-focused activities that may further engage community college students.

Venues for involvement

Residential Halls

Literature on the presence of residential halls at community college campuses and students' experiences of living on-campus is scarce. Even the exact number of campuses that have on-campus living is not resolved by the literature, with some reports showing less than 6 percent (Lords, 1999), and others (Murrell, 1998) up to 23 percent of two-year colleges providing housing.

In spite of the discrepancy in numbers, both sources agree that community college students benefit from living on-campus. Murrell (1998) explains that living in residence halls positively affects students' academic life, and specifically by freeing up time and facilitating access to the library and classrooms. Time that is usually spent commuting can instead be used for studying or meeting with faculty. In addition, living with other students increases interaction and peer support as students are able to study together more regularly. Murrell (1998) does report, however, that students' perceptions of residence halls as an academic community is lower than that of students at four-year campuses. This may be due to the fact that only a small proportion of the student body actually lives on-campus. Nonetheless, students feel that both the staff and peers in the halls positively contribute to the academic climate provided by on-campus residential life.

Because of these perceived benefits, the demand for dormitories at two-year campuses is increasing (Lords, 1999). Whereas early on only a few rural campuses offered such services to alleviate the burden of having to make a long commute, college administrators are now seeing residence halls as a way of supporting students' academics and even as a means of recruiting prospective students to their campuses (Lords, 1999).

Some of the colleges that are building on-campus dormitories include the campuses of the Collin County College District, Central Wyoming College, Black Hawk College, and Joliet Junior College.

Athletics

In contrast to residential halls, the large majority of two-year campuses offer athletics as part of the curriculum, intramurally, or competitively. Cohen and Brawer (1996) report that community college students, in general, show an interest in participating in intramural sports. In certain communities, team sports events are well attended and even financially profitable to the two-year institution. For example, competitive athletics are popular at many rural campuses due to the close relationship among members in the community and lack of other competing recreational activities (Monroe, 1972). In addition, athletics can be important for community colleges' public relations and have also be used to recruit students from surrounding counties (Berson, 1996).

The presence of athletics at these campuses has further been shown to "provide student athletes with opportunities to develop lifelong academic and interpersonal skills" (Berson, 1996, p.6). I will highlight the efforts at Broward Community College to show how athletics can positively influence students. In 1992, Broward Community College implemented the Athletic Plan for Excellence, which aims to assist student athletes in developing their athletic, academic, and life skills. Students in this program participate in a new student orientation and receive individualized academic advising and mentoring. To qualify for the program and participate as an athlete on a team, students must meet the

regular college admissions and financial aid requirements, maintain a minimum GPA, and be enrolled full-time.

The Athletic Plan for Excellence has been shown to positively affect students' college experience and educational attainment (Wright & Galbato, 1992; Berson, 1996). Wright and Galbato (1992) report that student athletes graduated at a higher rate (20.2%) than non-athletes (5.6%). Berson (1996) conducted a qualitative study to examine the factors contributing to student athletes' academic success. Interviews with team members of the girls' softball team revealed that several athletes credited their continuation in the community college to membership on the team. Students cited the group support of their teammates, having a coach as a mentor, and taking classes with other team members as factors that helped them persist through their coursework (Berson, 1996). This type of support, along with the self-esteem that comes with playing sports, may be particularly important for students who are either underprepared or not focused upon entering the community college. Through participation on a sports team, higher levels of satisfaction and a sense of connection between the student and the institution were also fostered (Berson, 1996). Therefore, athletics at two-year campuses is common but can take many different forms. Athletic programs, like that at Broward County Community College, show great potential in supporting and furthering the educational attainment of student athletes.

Clubs and organizations

A multitude of different student organizations exists on any community college campus. They range in emphasis from service (Circle K, Roteract, Earthwise) and vocational (Auto Body Club, Court Reporting Club) clubs to cultural (Asian Indian Club,

International Student Association) and religious (Campus Crusade for Christ, Muslim Student Association) organizations to academic (Math Club, Philosophy Club, Future Teachers Club), recreational (Salsa Club, Music Club), and political/interest (Feminist Majority Leadership, Gay, Lesbian & Bisexual Community) groups. In short, a student club exists for almost every possible interest, and if not, a new club can be chartered.

Again, while clubs and organizations abundantly populate two-year campuses, the vast majority of students do not participate with great frequency in these programs (Coley, 2000). Therefore, the impact of these clubs may be negligible when examined collectively, however, upon focusing on specific programs, their individual contribution may be revealed.

At Middlesex College, administrators sought to promote the theme of diversity in response to a shift in the student population. In particular, large numbers of Southeast Asian and Hispanic students had begun enrolling at Middlesex since the late 1980's (Clements, 2000). In addition to implementing various student services and revising the curriculum, the administration also created an international club to help increase appreciation for student diversity at the college. Later assessment of these programs revealed that participating in the international club helped raise awareness of people from different backgrounds and cultures. This student organization along with others has also been shown to positively affect the campus climate and support student diversity (Clements, 2000; Kee, 1999). Furthermore, participation of underrepresented minority students in these types of extracurricular clubs is recommended as a way to improve student retention (Kee, 1999).

Honors programs and societies

Historically, honors programs have not been a major part of the curriculum at community colleges. Laanan (2000) explains that this is because honors programs may be inherently elitist in nature and therefore antithetical to the open access dedication of two-year colleges. In recent years, however, they have been used to strengthen the quality of the academic programs and image of the college, attract and retain students, and facilitate the process of transfer (Laanan, 2000). Currently, approximately 36 percent of community colleges nationwide offer honors programs (Outcalt, 1999).

Honors programs consist of various aspects including honors classes, achievement-based financial aid, special guest speakers and seminars, and individualized advising. For example, the Scholars' Honors Program (SHP) at Cerritos College provides opportunities for independent research with faculty members, special workshops, and scholarships. SHP admits motivated students with competitive high school GPAs and aspirations to transfer to four-year institutions. Through the honors program, Cerritos has been successful in transferring cohorts of underrepresented minority students (Cerritos College web-site). While individual programs may be quite effective for groups of students, Bulakowski and Townsend (1995) explain that "there is a paucity of empirical data documenting the positive effects" of honors programs in general (p.486).

Many honors programs also provide opportunities for students to gain membership in student honors societies. The most well-recognized honors society for students at two-year colleges is Phi Theta Kappa (PTK), which is the sister association of Phi Beta Kappa. The presidents of the Missouri junior colleges for women established Phi Theta Kappa in 1918. The purpose of Phi Theta Kappa is to "encourage scholarship among two-year college

students…[and] provide opportunity for the development of leadership and service [and]…exchange of ideas and ideals" (Phi Theta Kappa web-site). This honors society is the largest in American higher education with more than 1.3 million members and 1100 chapters. PTK accepts both part-time and full-time students as members. Beside Phi Theta Kappa, numerous other honors societies are represented at community college campuses. To name a couple, Phi Beta Lambda serves honors students in the business fields, and Psi Beta is the national honor society in psychology for community and junior colleges and has over 16,000 members.

Student Government

While other forms of extracurricular activities may show at least moderate success, student government has been identified as one of the arenas in which it is most difficult to promote student involvement (Monroe, 1972). Not only is participation lacking among those who wish to serve, but also the student electorate itself shows low levels of interest. Rarely do the majority of students participate in the election process at two-year campuses. Monroe (1972) explains that in actuality, student leaders in government organizations have little power; they do not control their own funds and are subject to administration indoctrination and administrative veto. In effect, student government exists more as a token or "paper organization" (Monroe, 1972, p.239).

In sum, the value of traditional activities for student engagement can be most clearly observed when examining case-studies of individual programs and efforts. Nevertheless, there is a dearth of information on the collective impact of extracurricular activities at community colleges. While the benefits imparted to students who do participate are evident, how can involvement be expanded to include and benefit larger numbers of students?

Specifically, how can activities and programs be tailored specifically for community college students?

Recommendations for increasing student involvement

First, traditional extracurricular activities can be customized to fit the schedules and particular needs of older and part-time students. Hughes (1994) explains that programs that involve the family and take place on weekends have been more effective in engaging non-traditional aged students. Furthermore, programs that are directly related to students' academic progress or have practical application for future occupation witness greater participation rates. Glenn Farr (1998) explains that activities that are centered around career interests are also very likely to be community service oriented. He offers as an example the Dental Hygienists Club offering free dental screenings in the community. These types of programs have personal relevance to students and are also in line with two-year colleges' dedication to serving the community.

The participation of community college students can also be enhanced by reexamining the focus of student activities. In Maxwell's (2000) study, he explains that although extracurricular activities are not popular, a larger percentage of students (48%) instead interact with other students around their courses. In particular, study groups are a venue for social activity. Therefore, in order to engage a larger percentage of students, student activities may need to have a more curricular focus. Hagedorn (2000) contributes to this discussion and reports that students at two-year campuses find informal activities more relevant in their development of peer and faculty relations than traditional forms of involvement. While many students may not join clubs or participate in student government,

they report that it is not difficult to meet and make friends with other students (Hagedorn, 2000). Both Maxwell and Hagendorn find that "a principal factor bringing the majority of students together outside the classroom was their interest in studying together with one or a few other students""(Maxwell, 2000, p.215). Collaborative learning strategies and structures may be more appropriate means for engaging the community college student body. The "learning communities" approach, which promotes team-oriented group work and active learning, is a way to infuse student involvement into the curriculum (Foote, 1997).

Support, implementation, and assessment of student activities are also necessary for continued success. Implementation of programs relies on the leadership of the director of student activities or a faculty sponsor. Monroe (1972) asserts that the director of student affairs is a full-time position that requires full-time commitment. Furthermore, faculty members need to be active in their involvement and support of student activities as they have the greatest influence on and most frequent contact with students (Nejman, 1999). Finally, programs and services offered through the student affairs units need to undergo constant assessment and review (Williams, 2002). On many campuses, student advisory boards have been established to work with the student affairs department to offer input on activity programming (Farr, 1998). These boards are made up of representatives from the various student clubs on campus. As the student population of community colleges is never static in its growth and diversification, activities and programs must reflect shifts in the population and its needs.

Conclusion

An examination of student involvement and the value of student activities at two-year campuses is important for fostering development and success of an often overlooked student population. Extracurricular activities, such as clubs, athletics and honors programs, benefit many students at four-year institutions and some student at community colleges. Due to the nature of the student body at community colleges, however, traditional forms of student involvement may lack relevance. Efforts to increase the scope of student involvement to provide opportunities for older, part-time, working, minority, underprepared, and married students are especially needed at these colleges. As involvement has repeatedly been shown to enhance learning, retention, and achievement, community colleges need to dedicate themselves to seeking appropriate and meaningful venues for engaging the student body.

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